COMMON CAUSE
July/August 1987

COLBY

Arms Control's Secret Weapon

AN INTERVIEW

Former CIA Director William Colby has spent most of his life worrying about the security of his country. What worries him most now is the arms race.

For those whose notion of a spy is a cross between James Bond and George Smiley, former CIA Director William Colby comes as a bit of a surprise.

A commando paratrooper during World War II who once dropped behind enemy lines to assist the French resistance, Colby originally intended to pursue a career as a lawyer. But he was drawn to the CIA shortly after its creation at the beginning of the Cold War, and spearheaded the agency's secret campaign to prevent a communist takeover in Italy during the early fifties. Colby's critics view him as the ultimate "good soldier" — cool, objective, unquestioning. He was deeply involved in intelligence efforts in Vietnam as early as 1959. During the war he coordinated the agency's notorious Phoenix operation, an effort to identify and root out the Viet Cong that ultimately led to the deaths of 20,000 Vietnamese.

In his autobiography, *Honorable Men* (published in 1978), Colby defended his role in the Phoenix program, saying that the program did not call for murder but for the identification, capture and "lawful sentencing" of Viet Cong and the "use of military or police force against them" as "a final resort." Colby may be drawing a rather fine distinction here, something he often does: Questioned about the CIA's use of the word "neutralize" in a manual written for the Nicaraguan contras, he launches into a discussion of semantics, arguing neutralize isn't really meant to be a euphemism for "kill" because it can be traced to communist China, where it actually means to "shame" one's political opponents.

During his 25 years with the CIA, Colby saw popular support for its agenda give way to vast skepticism about U.S. involvement overseas and outright repulsion at some of the agency's tactics. In 1974, only a year after Colby took control of the CIA, there were sweeping revelations about the agency's activities going back to the fifties, including its efforts to influence foreign news coverage and to wiretap and spy on U.S. citizens. Not long afterward, President Ford asked Colby to step down.

Today Colby, 67, lives the life of a Washington consultant. He is finishing a book about Vietnam. He and his wife, Sally Shelton-Colby, a former ambassador and State Department official, work out of their home in Georgetown, an unpretentious town house decorated with photographs and memorabilia. Colby has a patient, gracious manner; he answers his own phone.

He also maintains the cool, detached stance of a company man. He views the Iran-contra affair largely as a matter best left to the lawyers to resolve. He sees no need for a major adjustment in the tension between Congress and the CIA — the system, he suggests, does work. He believes in covert operations overseas and downplays criticism of U.S. intervention in other countries. He acknowledges that the CIA has made "mistakes" in the past, but believes they have been blown out of proportion. He is not one to assign blame.

Ironically — given his background — Colby seems to reserve his strongest feelings for arms control, an issue he was drawn to during the controversy over SALT II in the late seventies. An avowed opponent of the MX missile, partly because it is a "first-strike" weapon, Colby took a leadership role in the nuclear freeze movement several years ago. He also serves on the board of the Committee for National Security, an arms control group. Arms control activists prize Colby, saying he can open doors that would normally be closed to them and make the case for arms control with conviction and authority.

In the following excerpts from an interview with *Common Cause Magazine*, Colby talks about the CIA, Vietnam, arms control and Star Wars, as seen through the unique prism of America's former top spy. —*The Editors*

On Irangate

Covert operations have a function. [But] you need to be careful and discreet. The problem here is that if you prohibit the agency [from being involved], which the Boland Amendment did, but do not prohibit the cowboys from doing it, you're going to lose the professionalism and you're probably going to end up worse . . . . Every time Gorbanifer [the arms middleman] gets near a lie detector the thing goes off the tracks, yet they insist on using him. How do you expect to keep this very delicate and difficult operation secret? You're hiding it from Congress, you're hiding it from the leadership of the Senate and the House, and yet you let some ragtag rug merchant in the Middle East in on it. It doesn't make any sense. . . .

It was a silly operation, frankly. The whole Iranian thing I think was just totally wrong. But it's not a disaster. . . .

I react as a lawyer. . . . You know, laws are very specific . . . so you have to look at the complicated legal issues to see whether it's wrong or right. You can do certain things on your tax return: You're entitled to avoid taxes; you're not entitled to evade taxes. . . . It's a comparable kind of problem. . . .

There's a whole tangle of complicated legal questions here. My own feeling is that what you have here is zealots for the cause. They stepped as far as they dared and probably stepped over the line. . . .

The only thing legally wrong [with the sale of arms to Iran] was the stupidity of saying, "Don't tell Congress." It's hardly "in a timely fashion" [to inform Congress] 10 months later — it's a clear violation of that particular directive and will be the subject of negotiation and perhaps a change in legislation. . . .

What Congress is obviously investigating is the larger question that, if Congress has a role and says that we don't want this kind of thing to happen, how precise does Congress have to get? Does it have to refine every last detail, or can it expect the executive to cooperate with it in the gen-

William Colby was interviewed by magazine editor Deborah Baldwin and staff reporter/researcher Peter Montgomery.

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eral policy that it's espoused? And basically you have to say that the separation of powers suggests that they have to be very precise. . . .

On Covert Operations

When we have consensus, there's really very little trouble. There's a large-scale covert action going on in Afghanistan. It was the subject of a two-column headline in *The New York Times* and the next day the story disappeared — nobody paid any attention to it. Why? Because everybody agreed it was a good idea to help the Mujaheddin against the Soviets in Afghanistan. . . .

The Bay of Pigs was a disaster. If it had succeeded, I think it would have been met with a roar of approval and it would have avoided the Cuban missile crisis a year and a half later. . . .

Is it right that we help the contras, who want to struggle against a government which is about as hostile as any is in this hemisphere toward the United States? I don't see anything morally wrong with helping people who want to bring about a more positive relationship between their country and ourselves. . . .

I would have some differences of opinion as to how you go about it. I think the contras thing was definitely putting the paramilitary horse before the political cart. The first thing you do is build a political base and cause and then on that you develop a paramilitary structure. I think that we instead went for mining harbors and blowing things up without creating a basic force. That's a political job, [and done] with radio and leaflets and agents and wall markings. . . .

I think the administration has done a very good job in El Salvador. They've found a good leader, Duarte. He's not perfect but he's good. He suppressed the death squads essentially, though not totally. They've launched a land reform program to some degree. It should be better. Our military involvement is limited to 55 U.S. soldiers — not 500,000 — 55. We've lost a couple of those, but that approach is exactly the way to do it. The enemy has gone down in strength. They once in a while will launch an attack, yes, but they [have been] substantially reduced in strength. That's the way to do it, and we did it very well. . . .

On Congressional Oversight

If the president makes a finding that it is important to our national security that we give help to a group of people, the CIA is required in a timely fashion to brief the two intelligence committees of the House and Senate respectively. [The committees] don't have to approve it; the law is very careful about that. But of course, if they don't like it, Congress can vote to disapprove it. So it's a form of consultation, and as I understand it there have been a number of cases where this administration has taken proposals down there and Congress has said, "You can't have that," and they've withdrawn it. . . .

In addition to that process, there is the annual budget process, whereby they have to present the reasons for the request for money and justify how many people you're going to have in Thailand and what they are going to do. . . .

The agency will be responsive if the secretary of state and the secretary of defense say, "Damn it, we ought to be doing something about X." . . . If the president really wants to get something done, it is the agency's job to go do something, just as if the president sends the ships up to the northern Gulf, the ships are supposed to sail up there. That's why you have a disciplined service. If they think it's too dangerous, they should tell him so. . . .

There is a legitimate basis for the CIA's activities. There's also a legitimate basis for controlling its activities. . . . [In 1975 a Senate select committee on intelligence activities] made a year's investigation of the agency and questioned whether we had a rogue elephant on our hands. It issued a report that said the problem wasn't that the CIA was out of control; the problem was that it was too much under the control of the president and that the Congress did not do its job in supervising it. The CIA was doing what it was told, and that's what it should do as a member of the American government working for the president. . . .

I think essentially, yes [Congress is doing its job], very, very loosely. These hearings are an indication that something is a little off the track — I really mean a "little." . . . [Irangate] hasn't put the nation in danger. It isn't an attempt to screw the political process around so that it doesn't work . . .

There'll be continuing tension [between Congress and the administration]. There's nothing wrong with it; it's the way we run our government. It is designed to require a consensus of the two bodies in order to get anything done in this country, and when we have the consensus, there's really very little trouble.

"[Treating Star Wars] as a bargaining chip is the best possible thing you could do with it. What you really don't need is to build it."

On Vietnam

I have some feelings about what we did well and what we did badly, and there's plenty of both. . . .

I'm certainly regretful that we pulled the plug on them and caused the country to collapse. . . . The devastation in Cambodia, and the fact that those countries are totally sunk — I don't think that was a necessary outcome. . . .

In 1972 we had actually won the war. We had recruited the guerrillas, brought them into the home villages and communities. We gave out a half a million guns to villagers to use in their own defense. The young boys and young women of the village would stand guard a couple nights a week. . . . They were protecting their own communities, having elections and economic programs, moving very fast, very effectively. And the Vietnamese forces stood up very well to the communist forces with the aid of American air power and American logistics. . . . American support was vital — the logistics and the air — because finally the enemy was in big troop units, which are good targets for [B-52 attacks]. . . .

The only difference between 1972 and 1975 was the absence of American air and the absence of American logistics. . . .

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[The antiwar movement] was based on frustration that we had 500,000 soldiers over there and didn't seem to be able to do anything with them. If they had been winning, I think the American people would have supported it. But we sent 500,000 soldiers to go look for the enemy and they couldn't find them. So they started bombing everything, shooting everything. The Americans finally got disgusted and nobody more than the troops themselves. They couldn't find the enemy. We just used exactly the wrong tactics.

On Arms Control

When I was in the agency I was involved in the monitoring of SALT I. . . . I had my briefings on the nuclear question and went through the NORAD and the SAC bases. At this missile site up in North Dakota you go down into the thing and at the bottom there are two young officers on opposite sides of the room so they can't touch each other. They both have the keys [to launch the nuclear weapons]. . . .

There's a huge damn missile sitting there, three stories high or something, and it's pointing at some place in the Soviet Union — I'm not sure where. And you think of two similar young officers in the Soviet Union sitting in a very similar silo with an equally big or maybe even bigger missile pointed at Chicago. . . .

There must be a better way of solving these problems than having these big things pointed at each other. It's dumb. I know that unilateral disarmament doesn't work — I'm enough of a cynic to realize it; I've been involved in a couple of wars, and it doesn't do any good to be just sweetness and light to somebody who's out to get you. . . .

It seemed to me that SALT, and particularly the ABM [antiballistic missile] Treaty, is exactly the way to do it. You avoid a threat by mutual agreement. We reached agreement on the ABMs until recently, and we avoided spending, who knows, $100 billion or more on ABM systems which wouldn't have made us any safer. . . .

Kissinger once said, "I wish we had better contemplated the prospects of a MIRVed world." I wish they had too, because the MIRV [or multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle — a rocket armed with multiple warheads] is just very dangerous. So it's pure logic in terms of protecting our country from some terrible cataclysm.

These things are real. That's my point. Most people think of them as unreal. Baloney! . . .

We've had a number of false alarms, reports of Soviet launches. We have a process of scrubbing those very quickly, to make sure that they're real and not vague. There are a whole series of steps you take. By the third stage you've moved your whole SAC bomber force into a high state of alert — and we've gotten up to stage three on two or three occasions on a false alarm. We do have a very tight control. I hope the Soviet system is as tight as ours. . . .

The verification problem [of being able to verify that the Soviets are complying with arms agreements] has been used as the reason not to conclude a whole series of potential arms control agreements, and I think falsely. . . . We do a darned good job . . . thanks to the huge improvement in intelligence. . . .

My point is, in a world with 25,000 nuclear weapons on both the Soviet and American sides — 50,000 in all — if you miss by a couple of hundred, it really wouldn't make a bit of difference. If you could get an agreement to drop it to 10,000 on each side, you'd be 15,000 better, more or less. . . . That's still too many, but nonetheless it's a step. I don't think a world without nuclear weapons is ever going to happen. But I would like to get them down in numbers so that you don't have a danger of destroying the world. Remember, two cities have been destroyed by nuclear weapons. Other cities have been destroyed by ordinary bombs — Dresden, Berlin, all the rest. You can rebuild if that's the scope of damage. It's not a pretty subject but it's a fact. But I don't think you can rebuild after an exchange of 8,000 nuclear weapons. There's nothing left. . . .

You say the purpose of nuclear weapons is deterrence? Then fine. Why do you need more than a very minimal number? . . . President Carter is reputed to have gone to the Pentagon early in his term and asked for an explanation of why we need more than 200 nuclear weapons. It's a very good question. I don't think he got a good answer. It nearly blew the roof off the Pentagon. . . .

We have a military institution; we need it to protect our country. But we seem to put an inverse amount of our effort on the forces that we are least likely to use. We put more of our debate and attention to nuclear weapons that we're probably never going to use, and we put very little of our time into the special forces, the intervention forces, that we're most likely to use — the anti-terrorist groups and so forth. That's where we ought to [put our priorities]. . . .

I think Gorbachev is something different. Not that he's a good guy, but he has other priorities — the stupid economy. He just doesn't want to [step up] an arms race with the Americans that will use up a great deal of their resources on nothing of any value. [Similarly] the percentage of our R&D effort that goes into military should go into civil uses; it's just horrendous. . . .

Breaches of the treaties are very, very ambiguous. There's a clear breach of the ABM Treaty in this radar system in Siberia; it's no immediate threat to our security or anything and the Soviets have offered to tear it down. They should have built it out on the seacoast and that would have been all right — but under the treaty they built it in the wrong place. If they'd had any brains, they would have asked us for permission to build it there. If we had any kind of relationship, that's the way you would solve a problem like that. . . . That's what we did under SALT I. When I was in office, we would see things that looked like a violation and we would raise it with the Soviets. . . . They had put some environmental shelters over their missile sites — they were doing some work and it was cold. We said, "Take them off." They said, "By the way, you've got some too." We said, "Well, we're doing some work and it's cold." . . . There are ways to work these things out. . . .

I spent a lot of years worrying about the security of my country against all sorts of things, from Nazis to communist guerrillas in Vietnam, to North Vietnamese forces in Laos, to nuclear weapons. They're all of a piece. You have to figure out the right answer to each one. It seems to me the nuclear thing is perhaps the easiest one to reach an agreement on. It's not easy, but it's the easiest.

On Star Wars

[Treating Star Wars] as a bargaining chip is the best possible thing you could do with it. What you really don't need is to build it. And bargaining chips are bargaining chips while they're ideas — once they become weapons you can't get rid of them . . . The president has said, "This is no bargaining chip; this is my dream."

He believes that you could change the whole relationship to a defensive one from the present offensive one. . . . That's theoretically the justification for SDI [Strategic Defense Initiative]. I think the president oversold it in his first speech as a great umbrella that was going to protect the whole country. [It sounds terrific] and it's just totally unworkable. It's very simple: It won't work, it's dangerous, it's a waste of money, and it puts us in exactly the wrong direction of building more things instead of reducing things. . . . Just get this dream out of your head and put your real energy into reducing these weapons. ◆